

The Girl in the Peter Pan Collar

UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES A Memoir of the Fifties

By Sally Belfrage
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By Joyce Johnson

NINETEEN FIFTY THREE was the year that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been found guilty of giving atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, were executed in adjoining electric chairs. It was the year that the promising Smith College poet Sylvia Plath worked as guest editor for *Mademoiselle* and shortly afterwards attempted suicide. And it was the year that Sally Belfrage, age 17, a student at the Bronx High School of Science, started dating a West Point cadet and carried on her futile campaign to pass as the all-American girl, despite the fact that her father and mother were under surveillance by the FBI and threatened with deportation.

"When I was a child," Belfrage writes in this posthumously published memoir, "I wanted to be famous; by adolescence I yearned to be invisible. In the fifties it was every American's duty to lie low and blend in, but other people seemed to have

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Sally Belfrage

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so much less trouble at it." Within the young girl who strove to be as normal as Velveeta Cheese was the angry, skeptical soul of a rebel. Within the radical and feminist that Belfrage later became were troubling remnants of that fictional construct, the all-American girl!—the ghost that would also haunt Sylvia Plath and other women of the '50s who struggled to forge destinies for themselves very different from the lives of their housebound mothers.

Belfrage's adolescent rebellion was complicated by the fact that "there was no place to rebel that Daddy hadn't been already." Cedric Belfrage, editor of the radical weekly the *Na-*

tional Guardian, "had ages ago picked as targets, as he put it in one of his books, 'hypocrisy, jargon, dogmatism and stuffed shirts,' and there he stood, railing against them all . . . being pure. Isn't that what youth is supposed to do . . . ?" What Sally rejected, however, was not her parents' politics but their bohemian ways. She set herself to become "the little woman," unlike her mother "who was not the real thing at all with her glamour and independence."

Belfrage's upper-middle-class British parents met on Fleet Street in the 1930s, when both were employed as writers by Lord Beaverbrook. Molly Castle was billed as "Britain's Number One Woman Journalist"; her chiseled features adorned the sides of London buses: "She was suited to the sort of life in which you dressed for dinner, came up to London for the Season, relied entirely on servants," her daughter writes. "You can hardly pick her out from the others in the photos of her youth—the Beautiful People lined up with their arms about each other's waists, one leg flapping in tandem with all the other legs . . ." Molly Castle didn't have a clue about the Depression, yet when she fell in love with Cedric Belfrage, she adopted his social consciousness, joined the Communist Party when he did (they quit after two years), and traveled with him to the Soviet Union and across the Pacific to California pregnant with Sally. In a charming house in Laurel Canyon, where they entertained Hollywood celebrities, the Belfrages continued to be the perfect golden couple, until Cedric returned to England "to help fight Hitler" by working for British and American intelligence.

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The war ended, but Cedric Belfrage never really came back to his family. For a few years, he continued his intelligence work in New York City, carried on an affair with a woman in his Rockefeller Center office, and visited his wife and two children on weekends in Croton, N.Y., where they lived, under FBI surveillance, in a converted cowbarn on a communal farm about a mile from where John Reed had written *Ten Days that Shook the World*.

No one studies a culture with more intensity than someone who has her nose pressed against the glass. As the rift between Cedric and Molly Belfrage became permanent and as Molly succumbed to years of depression and household chaos in a cramped apartment in the Bronx, Sally Belfrage absorbed the teenage version of what Betty Friedan later called the Feminine Mystique—from learning to wear the right kinds of socks to learning how to disguise her intelligence when in the company of a man, although she went to a high school for the intellectually gifted. Like Plath, she could pass quite well for the all-American girl. Belfrage was even chosen to be prom queen, although the Jewish boys at Science were too shy to dance with her. Underneath the blonde facade was a sense of being profoundly set apart, a constant fear of being unmasked (eventually her father's appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee made the papers), and a rage directed mostly at her mother.

THIS IS a memoir that looks back in unabated anger. Belfrage's writing is engaging, exuberant, witty and touching, except for the times she drowns her subject in attitude. Her portrait of Cedric Belfrage, who was severely penalized for being labeled a "premature antifacist" but retained his integrity, idealism and charm, is beautifully rendered, especially in the epilogue, set in the late 1980s, where he gallantly confronts his approaching death. But other important characters—Sally's beleaguered, emotionally fragile mother, whose inability to keep house is shown up by her pathetic recipe for spaghetti sauce; Sally's West Point cadet boyfriend, who later became a Star Wars general; her Bronx friend Debbi Giglio, who manipulated boys by maintaining an erotic balance between virginity and sex appeal—verge upon caricature rather than being presented in the round, allowing readers to form their own judgments.

Understandably, Belfrage *hated* the '50s. Pregnant at the age of 18 without technically having had intercourse, she underwent a harrowing abortion the day after Molly was deported to Great Britain; her father's deportation soon followed; her boyfriend's overprotective mother, fearful her son would wreck his military career by marrying Sally, threatened to report her to the FBI.

Belfrage's take on the conformism of the period is accurate and devastating. But even given Belfrage's exotic family history, was a sensibility like hers so singular? It is surprising that 40 years later she seldom tried to look beneath the conventional masks other young women of her generation wore despite her insights into her own confusion and doubleness. Recalling a bus-ride to West Point with 50 other "freckled, snub-nosed females, a whole freightload of Miss Rheingolds," Belfrage reflects, "While any diversity among us might seem to be a matter for a microscope, amounting to no more than the varying colors of our kisscurls, the others, unlike me, are what they seem: underneath the icing, the same nice, wholesome pound cake." Under all that icing, there may well have been one or two other alienated adolescents on the bus, for the revolutions in mores that would transform American life only a few years later came from the seeds that germinated in the '50s. ■